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ABSTRACT

Teachers can approach U.S. history since 1945 in two time periods. The first is "Postwar America" (1945-1973), the playing out of the economic, cultural, social, cultural/intellectual, and foreign policy thrusts and attitudes that grew out of the Great Depression and World War II. The second era, "Recent America" (1973-present), comprises an erosion and reshaping of those earlier attitudes in a process whose full configuration remains incomplete. Postwar economics consisted of a consumer-led boom fueled by a generation of pent-up demand. Society and culture were related closely to and supportive of the economy. Contemporary politics continues to reflect the rhetoric of the New Deal and World War II, as does foreign policy. However, a meaningful historical divide occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Civil rights and cultural revolutions brought enormous social and cultural changes. Inflation, lower productivity, and higher unemployment altered the economy. Politics has become factionalized. U.S. foreign policy and economic relations with other nations have changed greatly. It is time to give students a fuller, more accurate sense of the emerging contours of the recent U.S. past: the past that perhaps means most to them. (SG)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

National Council for History Education, Inc.

promoting history in school and society

American History since 1945: A Framework for Periodization

by Morton Keller, Brandeis University

We are rapidly approaching the half century mark of "American history since 1945," the catchall phrase for the recent American past in college (and graduate school), secondary and elementary history instruction. That is a long stretch of time in the context of American history: almost a quarter of the country's experience as a nation. Yet relatively little has been done as yet—in textbooks, in course curricula—to begin to look at the recent past through an analysis of interrelated political, economic, social, and cultural developments by which historians divide the past into meaningful periods.

In teaching the second half of the American history survey at Brandeis, I have tried to make that kind of sense of the past half century or so of American history. What I offer here is quite tentative, and subject of course to constant and unlimited revision. Perhaps this brief overview will stimulate just that.

My primary construct is a division of American history since 1945 into two periods:

(1) **Postwar America (1945-1973)**, during which the primary thrust of American life was the playing out of the political, economic, social, cultural/intellectual, and foreign policy attitudes and impulses created by the powerful national experience of the Great Depression and World War II;

(2) **Recent America (1973-present)**, a time dominated by the erosion of those earlier assumptions and conditions, and the reshaping of American social, economic, political, cultural, and international relations: a process whose full configuration still is far from complete.

Let me put a little flesh on these bare bones.

Postwar America (1945-1973)

We start with the postwar economy. Its distinguishing characteristic was an enormous consumer-led boom, tapping a generation of pent-up demand. It focused on big ticket manufactured items—houses, cars, appliances. It readily provided jobs for a Depression-and-War-shrunk workforce, whose relative maturity and skills, along with technological change, made for notably high productivity. With low inflation, relatively strong industrial unionization, and limited workforce pressure (immigration was low, middle class women stayed out), "affluence"—the capacity to afford more than the necessities of life—was relatively greater than ever before.

American society and culture in general was closely related to, and supportive of, these economic characteristics. The underlying all-inclusive democratic nationalism of the New Deal, the wartime theme of democracy versus racist nationalism and the postwar revelation of the Holocaust, were among the causes of a process in which an American cultural ecumenicism gradually assumed supremacy over the xenophobia and racism that had been so strong during the preceding half century. Antisemitism, anti-Catholicism, lessening intra-denominational conflict among Protestants, and most notably racial discrimination, segregation, and even (though more slowly) racist attitudes, declined. From the integration of the armed forces, sports, and entertainment, beginning in the late 1940s, to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, the values of postwar ecumenicism gradually spread through the culture. They exploded, so to speak, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, into a climactic "cultural revolution" in which traditional values regarding the family, sexual mores, speech and manners, etc., were subject to assault—an assault whose sources lay not so much in some new vision of the world as in the experience of the preceding decades.

From our present perspective, postwar political continuities with the New Deal and World War II past are much greater than the discontinuities. The line of descent from FDR's New Deal to Harry Truman's Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society is clear enough: in rhetoric, in content (expanding, but keyed always to broad national problems and needs), in the groups to which they appealed.

The Republican presidencies of the period were notable more for the degree to which they accepted the New Deal-World War II American state than for the degree to which they challenged it. The interstate highways, the space program, civil rights, Medicare and Medicaid, tax, tariff, monetary, social security, immigration policy—the 'big ticket' items in policy terms of the period—were for the most part conspicuously bipartisan. These were policies that reflected and interplayed with postwar economic growth, rising general affluence,

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and relative cultural unity: in short, the distinguishing features of postwar American society.

Much the same can be said about America's postwar dealings with the world at large. Economic policy was not a divisive party issue. Nor, for occasional moments, was foreign policy. A generation of Americans—leaders, the public at large—accepted the view that the basic lesson taught by World War II was that the United States must be involved in world affairs and be ready to intercede if a regime engages in territorial or ideological expansion. The rightness of the Nazi-Soviet/Hitler/Stalin analogy has been debated, then and since. But it seems clear that the large majority of Americans accepted it; certainly the American political leadership, regardless of party, did.

The character and experience of extra-party protest movements is a final measure of the power of this postwar consensus. The most divisive issues of the time were civil rights and the Cold War. And they fed the major expressions of dissent in the period: the Strom Thurmond States' Rights and Henry Wallace Progressive parties of 1948; Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism during the early and mid-1950s; Barry Goldwater's New Right Republicanism of 1964, George McGovern's New Left Democracy of 1972. What they had most in common was their inability to be major political forces for any length of time (although there will probably be debate over this regarding McCarthyism).

Recent America (1973-Present)

It is increasingly evident that a meaningful historical divide occurred in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and that American history since then can be distinguished from the preceding quarter of a century. It is possible, too, to see the change in periods marked by a "Crisis of the 1960s" consisting of the Kennedy, King, and other assassinations of political figures, Vietnam, the sexual revolution and the counterculture, and Watergate.

Inflation, a slowdown of productivity increase, rising unemployment, a decline in world market shares—in short, a number of mirror images of what had been happening before—have characterized the economy since the early 1970s. The reasons for this are complex. But the difference is sharp enough to justify the concept of a new period of American economic history emerging in the early 1970s.

A comparably major change occurred in American society and culture. The civil rights and cultural revolutions of the 1960s brought enormous social and cultural change: for blacks, Asians, women, the disabled, gays and lesbians, etc. It also put the relative cultural/social consensus of the postwar decades under great strain, generating new tensions (over abortion, over family and mores, over race relations) that have made recent American culture much more divided and divisive than during the postwar decades.

American politics, government, and foreign relations have evolved in close step with these new economic and social/cultural conditions. Watergate and the decline of popular respect for the nation's major public institutions (the branches of government, the parties, the media, education) stands in vivid contrast to the prevailing attitudes of the postwar decades. We are now in a period of factionalized politics, in which the most vigorous commitments are those of special-interest groups (and nowadays "interest" must be defined ideologically more than economically). Government spends more than it ever did; but belief in its capacity to do what it sets out to do is lower than at any time since the Depression. Certainly the contrast between Recent and Postwar America is sharp and substantial.

Much the same can be said of America and the world. The trauma of Vietnam led to as distinctive and (for its generation) as deeply-learned a set of foreign policy suppositions as World War II had done for an earlier generation of Americans. No less dramatic is the change in America's place in the world economy.

In sum, there is substantial evidence in the historical record—economic, social/cultural, politcal/diplomatic—to view the past half century as readily divisible into two periods, each with its own defining characteristics. The how and why of this evolution is a task that should and doubtless will be high on the agenda of modern American historiography. But surely it is time to give American students a fuller and more accurate sense of the emerging historical contours of the nation's recent past: the past that perhaps means most to them.

Suggested Readings:

Frank Levy, **Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution** (Norton pb: New York, 1988)

William Strauss and Neil Howe, **Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069** (Morrow: New York, 1991)

Charles R. Morris, **A Time of Passion: America 1960-1980** (Penguin pb: New York, 1986)

Richard Polenberg, **One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938** (Viking: New York, 1980).

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